

# WHAT WE LEARN FROM DESOLATION

*Antonio Guillén*

*'You will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.'* (John 16:20)

THE SCHEME WHICH ST IGNATIUS GIVES US in his First Week Discernment Rules attempts to help us recognise how consolation and desolation can each be both positive and negative. Consolation and desolation alike can tell us something about God; equally, both of them can also turn us away from God. We therefore have a problem about interpretation. How are we to understand consolation and desolation well? How are we to find in both of them the Lord's generous support?

Even positive experiences have to be sifted and interpreted. At first sight we might be inclined to take consolation at face value, as something to which we can just abandon ourselves completely. But the Rules suggest that a good use of consolation requires us to think, quite deliberately:

The one who is consolation should *think about* how they will be in the desolation that will come later. (Exx 323)

The one who is being consoled should *take care* to humiliate themselves and abase themselves as much as they can, *thinking* how little they are capable of in time of desolation. (Exx 324.1)

The point comes across all the more strongly in the Second Week Rules:

We very much need to *pay attention to the course of the thoughts* ... (Exx 333.1)

... then to look at the course of the good thoughts that it brought the soul ... until it drew the soul to its depraved intention; so that *when this kind of experience has come to be known and been noted*, care can be taken for the future. (Exx 334.2-4)

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... because often in this second time, through its own train ... of concepts and judgments ... it forms opinions of various kinds that ... *have to be examined very thoroughly*, before full trust is placed in them. (Exx 336.4-5)

Consolation, then, is in principle ambivalent; it can deceive. Perhaps, then, desolation, which seems properly and exclusively to come from the bad spirit, can have some benefits. Perhaps we can somehow discover within desolation the presence of the 'good spirit'. St Ignatius seems to have had no doubt that this could be so. Such a conviction seems to underlie the First Week Rules. He offers, as possible 'causes' for desolation, the idea that we are being *tested* for what we are, and the possibility that we are being given 'true awareness and knowledge ... that everything is a gift and grace of God our Lord' (Exx 322.3). He seems to be suggesting that positive experience on its own cannot yield this 'profit'.

It is to this profit that I am referring when I speak now of what we can learn from desolation. To illustrate the point, I would like to offer a parable. Parable is a literary genre not only profoundly rooted in the gospel, but also used often by St Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*. So we have the parables of the Temporal King, the Two Standards, the Three Classes, and even the suggestive way in which the 'contemplation on the Incarnation' elaborates on Luke's text. The First Week Rules themselves include tiny parables: the weak woman, the vain lover, and the besieged camp (Exx 325-327). So let us add another.

### ***The Parable of the Pool***

*There was once a pool amid a dusty landscape. Actually it was a wadi—a valley which in the rainy season becomes a stream. When it was full, it was so refreshing. Filled with water, its very presence radiated life all around. It enabled all kinds of greenery to flourish on its banks. Life flowed through its waters. It was a place for water sports. People felt attracted to come and bathe there, to fish, or just to enjoy the smooth blue waters that contrasted so powerfully with the dry landscape. The pool was very proud of all it could do, and of all it meant for those around.*

*But soon the pool dried up. One could hardly imagine a more appropriate symbol of death. Where there was once water, now there*

*was absolutely no life whatever. There was not a single trace of vegetation anywhere in the vicinity. At the bottom of the pool, people could see dead fish, rubbish, and human waste. The surface was ugly—nothing but dirty mud, or lumps of dry, caked earth. No-one would come any more for a picnic. People preferred to avoid it.*



*The pool became very upset. 'Why have I, who was once a source of life, become a symbol of death? What has happened to make me so hateful, rejected by everyone like this, when only a few months ago I was so attractive, so inviting to people?' Whereas before it was very pleased with itself, now its self-image was just the opposite. Everything conspired to make it see itself as ugly, dry, attractive to no-one, life-giving to no-one. What a difference!*

*Then a few months later the pool filled up again with water, and once again it was back to its old chirpy self. It forgot the feelings it had had when it was dry. But then the experience of dryness returned again, and with it the same sense of disorientation and meaninglessness.*

*Time and time again, the inexorable cycle of rainy years and years of drought continued. Eventually, this alternation made the pool think a bit. 'In this life, for whatever reason, sometimes it goes well and sometimes it goes badly. The only thing to do is to put up with what happens at each point, and not try to understand what it's all about.' But it didn't find these ideas very encouraging. On the contrary, they just made it discontented and bitter.*

*But then it had another idea. 'Up there, at the source of the river, there must be a Wellspring which can make something beautiful out of my dirty surface by sending me, freely and without strings, the flowing water*



*which transforms me and makes me into a delightful lake. I'm not just a pool; I'm a **wadi**. That's the only thing that makes sense of these different experiences.' And that idea led the pool to reflect even more deeply. 'How self-centred I was, how narcissistic, when I'd just accept all the fulsome compliments people paid me when I was so full of water.' Now it saw what the water truly was: a gift.*

*The alternations of positive and negative experiences*

*had brought the pool a new wisdom. Now it was well aware of how ugly its surface was, but it also knew it always had a generous, resourceful companion on its side. It knew who really deserved the compliments and the expressions of thanks that the good times provoked, and now it could pass them on to their proper place. But the pool could never have discovered this if the only experience it had ever had was that of being full of water. It was thanks to both experiences, and to the interplay between them, that the pool had had its true reality revealed, and also the generosity of the Wellspring.*

'The second part of this exercise'—so Ignatius might say—'consists in applying the above parable of the pool', sometimes full of water, sometimes completely empty. Something similar can be said of the spiritual person, who is sometimes in spiritual consolation and at other times in something completely the opposite. The point of the exercise is for the person to acknowledge how the two kinds of experience caused in the soul complement each other. Both teach us important lessons. For the very alternation between them enables the Lord's presence and generosity to be revealed all the more clearly.

**Desolation's Lessons**

Obviously, the central aim of the First Week Rules is the complete and definitive rejection of what the desolation is seeking to bring about: 'to lance the bad ones' (Exx 313.2); 'in desolation it is the bad spirit which is guiding and advising us, from whose counsels we cannot take a way forward that will be right' (Exx 318.2). The Rules suggest that this rejection occurs through a three-step process.

The first step involves firm restraint on the negative tendency of the desolation:

In time of desolation, never make a change, but be firm and constant in the intentions and decision in which one was the day before this kind of desolation. (Exx 318.1)

The second step is one of moderating the desolation itself, and of forestalling its taking root in the soul:

... it is very helpful to make changes in oneself that are against the same desolation, such as being more insistent in prayer, in examining oneself carefully, and in some appropriate extension of penance. (Exx 319)

... so that it *resists* the various agitations and temptations of the enemy, because it *can* ... even though it does not feel this clearly. (Exx 320.1-2)

... and think that it will be soon consoled, taking diligent steps against this kind of desolation. (Exx 321)

But to overcome the desolation completely, you need to take a third step, one that turns the tables on it, so to speak. Then what you take from the experience is the opposite of 'what the tempter is seeking'. At this stage, too, you are allowing yourself to be guided by 'the counsel of the good spirit, which always remains'. What this amounts to is a rereading of the *desolation* from the more serene perspective accorded by the *consolation* that follows. Though the desolation was at the time a negative experience, its deepest significance is a positive one.

Of course desolation is an unpleasant, dark, negative experience. But we also need to recognise that in the subsequent consolation we receive the gift of being able to read it in another way, and that—

against all our expectations—it can now give us new and wonderful benefits. The message's 'container' is negative; the message's 'content'—now that we have moved beyond its immediately palpable effects—is anything but.

The key text for understanding this third step is the ninth of Ignatius' Rules. This rule is about the lessons to be drawn from desolation, and Ignatius summarises them under three main headings.

*The Need to Cultivate the Gift Received*

The first of the 'causes' (he could have said 'purposes' or 'lessons') that Ignatius discovers in desolation is described as follows: 'because we are tepid, lazy or negligent in our spiritual exercises, and thus *because of our faults* spiritual consolation distances itself from us'. He is echoing here what the angel said to the Church in Laodicea:

... because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing'. You do not realise that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. (Revelation 3:16-17)

The reproach is directed at spiritual people who consider themselves self-sufficient, as 'permanent owners of consolation'. For the truth is that if consolation is not cultivated, it 'distances itself'. Ignatius thus insists on the need for tending.

Everything precious, everything valuable, needs to be cared for. If good seed is to produce fruit, it must be planted in rich, deep soil, not in rocky ground, or among thorns, or on the path. Then it is cultivated and watered; if there is no rain we use a waterwheel or a machine. If it looks as though it is drying up, we take this as a sign that it needs more water or better care.

*When the pool realised how much it depended on the water, it began to think about taking proper care of itself. When the water level went down suddenly, it would look to see if it had developed some new cracks somewhere. Then it would fill those cracks—an important way of keeping hold of the water it had and opening itself to receive more. It was grateful for the early warning it had received, because it could take some steps to put things right. And no other response could match the boundless generosity of the Wellspring.*

When, therefore, the result of tepidity, laziness and negligence in spiritual exercises is that peace and interior joy—in other words consolation—are withdrawn, then the experience can serve as a wake-up call, as a reminder of the need for gratitude, and as a summons to work more fully with the Giver of all. It is as though the Giver were saying to us, ‘Doesn’t the gift you’ve received really matter to you? You say it does, but you’re not making enough space in your life to hold on to it.’

The best possible basis for ‘spiritual exercises’ is a grateful recognition of the gifts already received and an openness for whatever might come in the future. We remind ourselves ‘where and to whom I am going’ (Exx 239.1), and we regularly give thanks to God (Exx 43.2). If this spirit is present, then all our ‘efforts’ at prayer—whether it comes easily or we find it difficult—can become moments of grateful ‘colloquy’ with the Giver.

*The Fragility of the Ego*

Ignatius stresses the second ‘cause’ of desolation more strongly:

... to test how much we are up to, and how far we are distant from His service and praise, without so much reward of consolations and accumulated graces. (Exx 322)

Desolation helps us to ‘feel and taste’ this truth—a truth that no spiritual person will ever have explicitly denied, but equally may well not have ever really believed and allowed to become part of them.

*When the pool was dry, it learnt who it really was: what its own surface was like, and how little good could be expected just from its empty hole. It tried to get water from somewhere else, and was prepared to pay everything it had—but then it realised it just couldn’t. The only thing it could do was to acknowledge that it had no resources of its own with which to ‘save itself’—or even to maintain the comfortable self-image that it used to have. After all, it was, really, a wadi.*

*But at the same time, something new dawned in its mind. It realised that its goodness had a source outside itself. It was dependent on the water that just ... just ... came. The weeks and months of emptiness had taught the wadi some self-knowledge. ‘No longer am I so absorbed in myself.’*

Similarly, the spiritual person learns something about reality from his or her desolations, and receives something of an inoculation—though never a complete one—against vainglory. Desolations involve a process of purification; now the person comes to recognise their own incapacity to carry forward their life-project of God's service and praise. They begin to sense almost instinctively that things do not work if they try to sustain themselves simply with their own ego. They are learning about what hinders their growth.

Repeated experiences of the ego's fragility exhausts our narcissistic selves that are so little inclined to acknowledge their weakness, and so prone to put up barriers against God's gracious action. We learn to 'give to God the things that are God's' (Mark 12:17). We need to recognise that its sand is no secure foundation: we have to find the rock on which the whole edifice can safely stand (Matthew 7:24).

The experience of desolation thus has an important and necessary purifying role. It removes false supports, and dashes false and narcissistic hopes. It puts things in their proper place, and teaches us to look at the Giver rather than the gifts. During the night, people look up to heaven far more often than during the clear light of day.

#### *The Presence of God as Giver*

The third of the 'causes' is the one which Ignatius elaborates most fully. It is formulated both carefully and at length:

... to give us a true awareness and knowledge so that we might sense interiorly that it is not from us to apply or to have accumulated devotion, intense love, tears or any other spiritual consolation, but that *everything is gift and grace of God our Lord*; and so that we not place our nest in something else, raising our understanding in some pride or vainglory, attributing to ourselves the devotion or the other parts of spiritual consolation. (Exx 322)

What is at stake is simply the presence of God as Giver.

The rationale behind this 'third cause' takes up and presupposes what has been said before. It reiterates the call not to attribute to ourselves the fruits of consolation. How can we explain the origin of 'accumulated devotion'? It would be absurd to attribute such an increase to oneself, having established that one could neither produce or conserve it when one thought one needed it. Ignatius here cites Thomas à Kempis, taking up a suggestive image: those who,



... without having wings to fly, ... want to set their nest in heaven ... because they presumed to greater things than pleased God they quickly lost His grace. They who had built their homes in heaven became helpless, vile outcasts, humbled and impoverished, that they might learn not to fly with their own wings but to trust in Mine.<sup>1</sup>

What is new and distinctive here is how this third 'cause' explains the 'true awareness and knowledge' that one receives from desolation when one looks at it in hindsight, with the benefit of a subsequent experience of consolation. 'Everything is gift and grace of God our Lord.' God's character as Giver is revealed in all its magnificence once one has recognised one's incapacity to conjure up God's gifts by any other means.

*The pool discovered the existence of the Wellspring by rereading past experiences in a way that was life-giving, vivifying—whereas any other reading was life-denying. Now everything took on a meaning, the positive and the negative. Both experiences (even that of being quite empty of water) had been necessary for it to sense how the Wellspring was always there. The droughts had been times of blessing. Anything that had brought this wonderful awareness was worth it.*

Desolation can often be a valuable lesson, helping a spiritual person to value properly what they regularly receive, and to understand what they are receiving as a gift. 'We only value something when we lack it', says a Spanish proverb, reflecting experiences known to all of us. So too the Prodigal Son's finding himself homeless and without food enabled him to feel the desire to return to his father's house, and to be grateful for the gift of being a son. At other times, desolation can truly be seen as a message of support from God to the person. 'I am here; don't think you are alone. I haven't forgotten you or abandoned you. Quite the contrary.' It is like parents playing hide-and-seek with their children—first they hide behind a tree, and then they immediately relieve the child's anxiety by reappearing. So the Wellspring likes to help the pool sense its closeness.

**Desolation  
as lesson  
and support**

<sup>1</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 3.7.4.

In none of these cases should desolation be thought of as an experience beyond God's control. The worst desolation in history—that of Good Friday—was anything but out of God's control. We Christians live today from the discovery that on that terrible day the love of the Lord was stronger than suffering, and from the consequent realisation that the 'silence of God' was pregnant with words of hope.

### ***Praying Through Desolation: Responding to the Lord's Goad***

The Easter stories in the Gospels confront us with a long succession of people in desolation. The catastrophe that was Good Friday made no sense to any of them. Everyone, in Ignatius' language, 'made a change', and in no uncertain terms. Hope was lost; the goodness of God seemed to have hidden itself; it seemed that Jesus was no more than a corpse to be respected or the central figure in a nice story to be retold and then perhaps forgotten. Jesus was, quite simply, dead—permanently.

At this point, the Risen One began to 'reconstruct' his broken friends, and to replace their reading of events with a new reading that made their hearts burn within them (Luke 24:32). The group of broken people who had scattered in their unhappiness slowly reassembled, and began to take on a life even richer than they had had before. In place of their 'barriers' and their disappointments, their pain was turned to joy (John 16:20). How had the Risen One provoked this change? How had he helped each one of his disciples to read reality anew?

In John's Gospel, there are three apparitions to disciples who are in desolation, and from the narratives we can discover a series of suggestions about how to pray through desolation. The questions posed by the Risen One give the disciples resources for prayer, within 'the divine help that always remains for them, although they do not sense it clearly' (Exx 320.2).

*'Why Are You Weeping?' (John 20:13)*

Mary Magdalen was looking only for Jesus' dead body. Downcast, badly disillusioned, she could see only death around her. She could interpret the empty tomb only as evidence that the corpse had been desecrated, as one more bitter blow. John underlines Mary's fixation with the tomb, and her constant weeping.

***The Risen One  
'reconstructs' his  
broken disciples***

In this situation of bitterness and tears, the Lord's gift appears through a question posed by two angels: 'Why are you weeping? What is the anxiety within you that is sapping your life?' When we are in desolation, the Lord's invitation takes the form of an insistent demand to move beyond our own sadness, to 'move outside' our 'self-love, desire and interest' (Exx 189.10), and to overcome the mortal evil of despair.

It is not easy to understand that sadness and one's own wounds can be material for prayer that is accepted by the Lord of Life. Nevertheless, the gift keeps on being given: we can recognise how Christ accepts these wounds, transforms them, and gives us another, liberating reading of them. Perhaps there is no better material for daily prayer.

Drawing on the 'divine help that always remains' for her (Exx 320.2), Mary responds to the question, and discovers that there is still an element of prayer within her pain ('they have taken away my Lord'). Without knowing how, she realises that she can stop looking at the tomb ('she turned around and saw'). For any Christian in desolation, there can be a new perspective that leads them beyond obsessive fixation with sadness, and allows them to discover, precisely in what is causing their desolation, the closeness of the Risen One who is giving life. As they respond to his question, their faith increases.

*'Who Are You Looking For?' (John 20:15)*

The gardener whom Mary Magdalen discovers beside her repeats the angels' question, but with greater warmth and taking it further: 'Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for to resolve and satisfy such misfortune?' Mary's answer, 'tell me where you have laid him', implies that she is looking for a corpse, for something that would have kept her in the sphere of death.

When the Risen One calls her by name—'Mary!'—he is claiming that he himself can give a positive meaning to the brutal disruption of Good Friday. There is One who is still listening to the cry of those who suffer, and giving answer. And this can occur for each of us. The Lord's fidelity is confirmed on Easter morning. Desolation is not the last word, either of history in general, or of our own individual life-stories.

Mary discovers herself anew, and she proclaims the foundation of a hope that she had thought lost: her living relationship with the Lord ('Rabboni!'). Through her contact with the Risen One, she too has, in

the fullest sense, risen again. His resurrection allows her to receive, as the 'apostle of the apostles', the first ecclesial mission:

'... go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God".' (John 20:17)

What better answer could there have been to her prayer? Could Mary Magdalen ever have imagined that she was to be sent on mission only a minute after feeling so joyless, so hopeless?

Every situation of desolation has hidden within it this supportive provocation from the Lord: 'Who are you really looking for—*really*?' If we honestly confront the provocation that such a question represents, if we try to unearth the response hidden within our griefs and disappointments, and if we reread the mission that the Lord has given us on this basis alone, then we come to sense that we are being sent by the Lord to new tasks and labours in a way that is radically different. Desolation used in this way has strengthened our confidence.

*'Is It Because You Have Seen Me That You Believe?'* (John 20:29)

Thomas is the victim of his own punctured enthusiasm, and perhaps also of unacknowledged feelings of guilt at not having accompanied Jesus to the end (John 11:16). The memory of his having betrayed Jesus on Good Friday is blocking him, just as with Mary Magdalen, Peter and everyone else. It is not easy to explain to him at this point that nothing good ever came from wounded narcissism.



What narcissism does accomplish is to instil a total lack of confidence in human mediation. Nobody can do anything to shake us out of the discouragement and sadness that are consuming us. That is what Thomas is expressing in the wildly formulated conditions that he sets for believing: 'unless I see the mark of the nails ...'. But soon afterwards, he is touched by the 'marvellous effects' (Exx 223) of the presence of his 'Lord and God' (John 20:28). He hears Jesus' gentle reproach for his haughty dismissal of

others' report: 'So, it is because you have seen me that you believe? Wasn't your companions' witness enough?'

Jesus' gentle correction refers to the group's shared experience. Ignatius would later write that the Spirit within each individual is the same Spirit that works within the whole Church (Exx 365.1). There were resources available to Thomas in the group of disciples that would have enabled him to counter his temptations. Those who will believe on account of the apostles' message will be blessed (John 20:29); faith is lived, fostered and nourished corporately. Thus Ignatius in the Discernment Rules advises that 'another spiritual person should know the tricks and insinuations that the good soul is suffering' as a way of preventing 'the tempter making progress with the malice he has begun' (Exx 326).

One of the sad effects of desolation is that one loses even the smallest sense of being part of a community, part of a Church. This sense is what the tax collector has, praying humbly in the temple; this is what the Pharisee, allegedly praying in front of him, in fact rejects through his presumptuousness (Luke 18:10-14). When the Risen One comes near to Thomas, and when Thomas' heart has been softened by the darkness, then he has learnt to be less like a self-contained Pharisee and more like the humble, grateful tax collector.

*'Do You Love Me?' (John 21:15-17)*

Peter had always believed that Jesus was asking him to follow him, even to Peter's laying down his life. Several times he had responded enthusiastically, rashly, to a question that was not in fact being put to him. It is only at Lake Tiberias, after the experience of Good Friday and the collapse of his strength, that he is able to hear the real question: 'Peter, do you love me?' Like the pool in our parable, he has had to see himself empty in order to recognise that his strength is a gift, and that every gift requires the receiver to give thanks.

When Peter answers at this point—at last with some humility—he is once again entrusted with a mission: 'feed my lambs'. Now indeed Peter will be able to fulfil this mission, and he can give his life in doing it if he wants to. The bitter, tearful desolation of Good Friday has shown him, finally, that the Giver's fundamental question to him was about love. The water from the Wellspring, which flowed through the pool and made it so abundant, was ultimately destined—like everything else from the Wellspring—for the Sea.

Sooner or later, people living by the Spirit will, like Peter, get the message from their consolations and desolations, and simply give themselves fully and freely to their sisters and brothers. Everything is received so that it can be passed onwards. We have to move beyond narcissistic pretensions, beyond imagining ourselves as owners of the good within us; we must also avoid the trap of seeking to hold on to it for our own enjoyment.

The point of the spiritual life is not to accumulate consolations, but to become more open to God. The ear needs to be attuned, the mind stretched, and the body loosened, so that God's presence can be discovered even in the silence, and we can come to love and serve God in all things. In this process, desolation has a vital role. Its lessons are salutary.

**Antonio Guillén SJ**, a native of Valencia, entered the Society of Jesus in 1962. He has taught business studies, and worked for many years in Jesuit administration. He is currently director of the retreat house in Alaquás, and superior of the Jesuit community in Valencia.